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**At Assumption, lessons to be learned from 'Breaking Bad'**

**TV SHOW THE FOCUS OF COLLEGE SEMINAR**



Assumption English professor Paul Shields teaches the "Reading Bad" senior seminar. (T&G STAFF/CHRISTINE PETERSON)

By Sara Schweiger TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

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WORCESTER — The 12 students in Paul Shields' senior seminar at Assumption College were "Reading Bad."   
  
If you're reading that as a grammatically poor assessment of their literacy, rest assured: These students were doing just fine. They were in Mr. Shields' classroom this semester to apply a literary lens to the highly acclaimed AMC television series "Breaking Bad," which tells the story of the transformation of Walter White (portrayed by Emmy winner Bryan Cranston) from mild-mannered family man/high school chemistry teacher to the methamphetamine kingpin known as Heisenberg.   
  
It was a semester-long journey that reminded students and professor that on TV as in literature as in art as in life, the power of myth prevails.   
  
To cap the journey, each student on Friday presented a project during an English Department colloquium that juxtaposed a "Breaking Bad" character, an episode or the series as a whole against a literary work or figure. Colleen Putzel's project analyzed two episodes and compared them to Samuel Beckett's play "Act Without Words." Vanessa Arroyo, the lone junior in the class, looked at "Breaking Bad" and Franz Kafka's short story "The Metamorphosis." Jaquilyn Hill examined the significance of Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" and the appearance of flowers on the show.   
  
According to Becky DiBiasio, chairwoman of the English Department at Assumption, "The class provides an opportunity for English literature majors to apply both literary and mass media theory to 'Breaking Bad' and other texts in a creative and challenging way."   
  
Turns out, more than just English majors signed up for the challenge; Brandon Revelli, for example, is majoring in global studies with a world environmental concentration.   
  
Not everyone in the class was a "Breaking Bad" fan — or had even watched the show — prior to registering. Ms. Putzel had yet to see an episode before the class started.   
  
Mr. Shields says he came late to "Breaking Bad." But once he started watching — binge watching, as many people do, on Netflix — he was hooked.   
  
"As I watched the show, I realized there were all sorts of literary references — references to Walt Whitman (the book "Leaves of Grass") and Kafka (an episode called 'Kafkaesque')," he said. One thing that really piqued his interest, though, was discovering allusions to his literary idol, Samuel Beckett.   
  
"Interestingly, he's (Beckett) probably the least acknowledged on the show in terms of authors by name. But when I first watched ("Breaking Bad" episode) 'Fly' a few years ago, I started to see this is really, in many ways, based on images in Beckett's play 'Endgame.' The more I looked into the episode, I realized this is really Samuel Beckett redone." Interesting note for Beckett fans: That episode was co-written by Moira Walley-Beckett, no relation to Samuel.   
  
Mr. Shields also proposed that the images of barrels filled with the chemical methylamine in "Breaking Bad" are evocative of trash cans in "Endgame." Citing the series' penultimate episode, he compared the image of ice cream lowered on a rope to main character Jesse Pinkman in a cage as a reworking of Beckett's "Act Without Words."   
  
**But Mr. Shields isn't all Beckett all the time. On a recent Tuesday afternoon, he guided the students in a comparison between the Percy Bysshe Shelley poem "Ozymandias" and the Season 5 "Breaking Bad" episode of the same name.   
  
"I won't read this as well as Bryan Cranston, I don't think," he quipped, referencing the actor's sinister recitation of the poem in Season 5 promos.   
  
"I met a traveler from an antique land / Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone/ Stand in the desert. ... Near them, on the sand,/ Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, who frown./ And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command ..."   
  
Ozymandias is the Greek name for the 13th century B.C. pharaoh Ramses II.   
  
"I want to discuss why (series creator) Vince Gilligan and the writers of the show decided to call the episode 'Ozymandias,' and what they are using from this poem from the Romantic period ... what they are drawing from on this poem that helps them to build their characters," Mr. Shields told the class.   
  
They talked about the fall of emperors, the inevitable path to demise we all traverse, the destructive power of pride that pervades both poem and TV show.**  
And they talked about myth.   
  
"Is the myth of Ozymandias alive?" Mr. Shields asked. Because, as he explained, myth is not true or false, it is living or dead.   
  
"The myth of Ozymandias is alive in our own culture because Vince Gilligan and the writers of 'Breaking Bad' decided it is still relevant to what's going on, even for viewers in the 21st century," he said.   
  
Professor and students traded ideas about Walter White/Heisenberg as Ozymandias, as the king of an empire. They discussed the image of Walt in the desert without pants as "two trunkless legs of stone ... on the sand."   
  
One student talked about time travel (meeting a traveler from an antique land), and the episode opens with a flashback to Walt and Jessie's first "cook" (making meth) in the desert, which, along the vein of time travel, becomes the "antique land." At the conclusion of the flashback, the images of Walt and Jesse and their RV fade out, leaving just the image of sand: " ... boundless and bare, the lone and level sands stretch far away."   
  
When Mr. Shields played clips from the episode during class, he implored students to tell him what they saw. "Teach me about this scene," he said.   
  
"Sometimes I realize I'm repeating things they've (the students) said or written," he admitted. And sometimes, they point out things he never noticed. One student drew Mr. Shields' eye to the sight of Walt's pants strewn in the desert in a particular scene that he had never noticed.   
  
Not all classroom discussions have been about specific episodes or works of literature.   
  
"We have a lot of very good debates, the nature of art, authorial intent," Mr. Shields said. They've talked about whether an artist's thoughts about his or her work matters when it comes to interpreting that work. "Does it matter if Vince Gilligan meant to put an allusion of Beckett in the episode and we're still able to draw out meaning? Do we need to know what Gilligan thinks about the show to comprehend it?"   
  
Ms. Arroyo says the group debated that topic for two class sessions, and neither the students nor Mr. Shields came to a conclusion. And that's OK, she said. "He does not force you to come to one end result, and he won't just spoon feed his students the answers," Ms. Arroyo said.   
  
"Reading Bad" won't be back in the fall, as professors take turns teaching their own senior seminars. But Mr. Shields said he plans to incorporate "Breaking Bad" into lessons on literary theory.   
  
"Are we reading too much into it?" Mr. Shields asked. "Are we going too far? I think sometimes we don't go far enough." *Contact Sara Schweiger at* [*Sara.Schweiger@telegram.com*](mailto:Sara.Schweiger@telegram.com) *Follow her on Twitter @SschweigerTG.*